



DESTINATIONS  
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SOCIAL IMPACT



# Destination Workforce Insights

## **Perspectives, Priorities and Actions from Across the Industry**

Insights, challenges and opportunities identified through DI's workforce listening sessions, along with the actions that will guide the next phase of our 10-Year Workforce Strategy.





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# What We Heard and Where We Go Next

In the first year of our 10-year Workforce Strategy, Destinations International (DI) set out with a simple goal: to listen. We convened seven audiences from across North America whose perspectives shape the future of our industry's workforce: CEOs and executive directors, people and culture leaders, early-career professionals, 30 Under 30 alumni, community engagement professionals, university faculty and university students. Their lived experiences, aspirations and challenges now form the foundation of our collective understanding.

What we heard was both hopeful and honest. Workforce development is a core driver of industry resilience and success. Common pressures and opportunities were identified: talent shortages, the need for visible and accessible career pathways, a growing emphasis on belonging and impactful leadership and the critical role destinations can play in advocating for our field.

This report shares what we heard across audiences: where perspectives align, where challenges persist and where bright spots are already leading the way. It also outlines the next steps DI will be moving forward, including adapting and testing these approaches with Canadian and global members so they can be tailored to diverse local contexts.

# Five Themes to Unite Our Workforce

Across all audiences we engaged, we heard the same core themes repeated with consistency:

1

## **Career pathways are unclear across the industry.**

It is difficult to see a long-term future in tourism without clear pathways, defined competencies and transparency around advancement. This applies equally to students entering the field and to staff trying to grow within their organizations.

2

## **Belonging is critical for retention.**

The ability to feel welcomed and valued is a defining factor in whether people stay with their destination organization.

3

## **Early pipeline development is urgent.**

Reaching young people early, building consistent educational institution partnerships and developing applied learning opportunities are critical.

4

## **Workforce storytelling is essential for awareness and trust.**

Tourism careers remain misunderstood. We can tell clearer, more relatable stories about what destination organizations do, who thrives in these roles and the long-term opportunities available.

5

## **Leadership and manager competency gaps are widespread.**

Managers across the industry lack consistent training in communication, feedback, coaching, emotional intelligence and impactful leadership.





# Audience-by-Audience Insights

In spring 2025, DI hosted a series of workforce listening sessions with five destination professional audiences. Each audience was a tailored set of questions specific to their role, and a consistent set of questions:

**Why is investing in workforce development and retention essential for the future of our industry?**

**How can your workforce better reflect the communities you serve and the visitors you want to welcome?**

In fall 2025, we extended this listening to the education side, meeting with university faculty and university students. Together, these prompts created a common throughline, allowing us to compare perspectives on representation, belonging and long-term investment in people across roles and career stages.

## CEOs and Executive Directors

CEOs and executive directors are increasingly treating workforce development as core to their organizational mission. Many shared that their destinations are now seen as **workforce conveners**, bringing together schools, employers and civic agencies to address regional priorities. They highlighted the importance of **business and partner training** to strengthen the visitor experience and raise professional standards, and several are working to shift perceptions about the industry by **engaging with students**.

Turning inward, leaders described a shift toward more open communication and intentional team development to support retention and long-term engagement. They acknowledged that **succession planning** needs to start earlier and be more deliberate, with leadership opportunities and higher-level exposure offered to emerging and early-career professionals.

### Examples

**Visit Charlottesville Albemarle County's "Tourism for All" Program is designed to support workforce readiness across the entire destination, building a shared expectation of professionalism and inclusivity. It establishes the destination as a community convener.**

**Destination Madison spent three years working with Centro Hispano, a key Latino community partner. The collaboration led to developing a workforce task force made of restaurant, hotel and sector-specific leaders that focuses on building representative talent pipelines.**

**Visit Pasadena brought in sales trainers for their staff and for hotel partners, strengthening professional competency and commitment both internally and externally.**

### Key Challenges

Succession planning is reactive rather than intentional. Staff often gain leadership responsibilities only after someone leaves or during a crisis, instead of through a structured development plan that prepares future leaders early on.

Public trust in destination organizations is fragile, raising the stakes of leadership transition. CEOs noted that one misstep or leadership gap can undermine credibility with residents and partners, making succession planning reputational and strategic.

CEOs reflected that after investing in early-career talent, they risk losing talent to municipalities, corporations or larger markets with higher pay or clearer paths for advancement. This turnover makes it harder to build and retain an internal leadership bench.



# People and Culture Leaders

People and Culture leaders feel increasingly empowered to shape cultures of belonging. They highlighted recent improvements in onboarding and communication that give staff greater **clarity, connection and a stronger sense of purpose** within the organization. Participants highlighted that leadership development must begin earlier, with managers needing training not only in technical skills but in **emotional intelligence, communication and impactful leadership**.

Several noted that **mentorship**, both formal and informal, is helping prepare emerging talent. They underscored the value of **community-based programs** and partnerships to expose staff to broader perspectives and reinforce the destination's commitment to local impact.

## Examples

**Leaders spoke about team rituals, all-staff meetings, cross-functional project work and consistent check-ins** that help employees feel valued and connected.

**Several have updated onboarding processes** to better articulate organizational values, inclusion commitments and expectations, helping new employees feel welcomed from day one.

**Explore Edmonton created independent, staff-led Culture & Engagement Committees** across its venue teams, the majority of whom are hourly and part-time workers often left out of culture work. These committees have their own budgets and decision-making authority to work on projects, leading to stronger belonging and retention.

## Key Challenges

Managers lack training in communication, feedback, coaching and inclusive leadership.

Onboarding quality varies widely depending on manager or department.

Belonging is inconsistent across teams; not all staff feel equally supported.

# Community Engagement Professionals

Community engagement professionals are uniquely positioned to reach residents where they are, foster trust and strengthen local workforce pipelines. Many current efforts aim to **break down barriers** and **build awareness and access** by taking tourism directly into schools, local organizations and multilingual environments. This audience provided several best practice examples.

## Examples

**Visit Frederick's workplace literary program in partnership with the Literary Council offers on-site English classes for hotel employees during paid work hours.** The program has achieved a 93% retention rate among participants.

**Visit Anaheim and the Cypress College Synergy Program allows college students to mentor high school students** and covers CTA certification costs.

**Visit Baltimore hosted a Youth Hospitality Summit on a university campus,** combining industry sessions, hands-on culinary demonstrations and competitions. They partnered with a funder to guarantee free college tuition for eligible participating students who maintain academic performance.

**Visit Greater Palm Spring's Youth Leadership Program** is a fully funded summer experience for underserved high school students, providing transportation, meals, stipends, headshots, business cards and immersive site visits.

**Visit Palm Beaches hosts a multilingual job fair** offering translation services, free headshots and a unified brand (PATH) for all workforce development efforts across the county.

## Key Challenges

Transportation and housing barriers limit access to tourism jobs and programs. Participants repeatedly emphasized that many residents, especially youth and lower-income workers, simply can't access jobs or training due to unreliable transit and unaffordable housing near job centers.

Language and literacy barriers restrict advancement for immigrant and multilingual workers.

Hospitality pathways are often missing or unclear in high schools; students don't realize they are qualified for tourism roles and school counselors lack accurate information.

## Early-Career Professionals

Early-career professionals spoke enthusiastically about their work, sharing that roles in destination organizations feel **meaningful and connected to something bigger** than themselves. Many described the day-to-day variety of work life as rewarding and energizing. When managers trust these individuals with real ownership of projects or stretch opportunities, staff feel **valued and more confident** in their abilities. Access to conferences and industry events further reinforces that sense of belonging and helping early-career professionals see a long-term future in the industry.

### Key Challenges

Limited upward mobility due to flat organizational structures and long-tenured leadership.

Fear of asking about growth or giving feedback due to hierarchy or lack of psychological safety.

Compensation concerns and pressure to take additional jobs to sustain cost of living.





## Evolving Leaders

Like the early-career professionals, 30 Under 30 alumni expressed strong enthusiasm for the tourism field, describing it as energizing, collaborative, creative and **deeply connected to community impact**. What keeps them engaged is the meaningful, people-centered nature of the work and the variety and pace that destinations uniquely offer. Many alumni shared that they stay in this field because it aligns with their **personal values of service and storytelling**.

A major bright spot is the tangible sense of industry **connection and identity** that 30 Under 30 alumni feel. These networks help professionals envision a long-term future in tourism and feel supported in their growth. Alumni also described the power of leaders who trust and invest in them, offering stretch assignments, access to executive conversations, speaking opportunities and the ability to lead meaningful projects. These experiences significantly **boost confidence and retention**.

### Key Challenges

Flat organization structures require leaving a destination to advance.

Desire for more purpose-driven work, innovation, and opportunities to lead.

Lack of representation in leadership roles limits belonging and aspiration.



## University Faculty and Professors

University faculty shared that students are most engaged when they have **practical, hands-on and experiential learning** connected to real tourism partners. These experiences are often the “a-ha moments” that shift student perception away from narrow frontline roles toward understanding the strategic, creative and community-driven work of destination organizations.

Class projects co-designed with destinations, **guest speakers** who represent diverse career paths, **site visits** and **applied learning assignments** help students see the breadth of tourism work. Faculty spoke positively about **destinations that engage early** (during freshman/sophomore years), maintain consistent campus presence and collaborate on multi-week or semester-long applied projects.

### Examples

**Faculty highlighted semester-long assignments where students build real deliverables for destination organizations**, such as marketing concepts, community initiatives or event proposals. These projects help students understand the scope and purpose of destination work.

**Capstone or senior-level internships** embed students into meaningful work and significantly improve career readiness and confidence.

**Consistent guest lectures from destination organizations** help demystify career pathways and give students access to professionals they wouldn't otherwise meet.

### Key Challenges

Applied learning often begins too late in a student's academic journey.

Little visibility into what destinations expect from new hires (competencies, soft skills).

Students and parents misunderstand tourism careers; destinations aren't on their radar.

## Students

Students at various stages of the undergraduate and graduate levels feel **energized by the purpose and variety** of tourism work. They value tourism's role in cross-cultural connection. Students learn most from guest speakers who demonstrate passion and from **hands-on shadowing and internship experiences**. Conference attendance is equally important: Students who attended DI Annual Convention had an **expanded understanding** and appreciation for the destination landscape.

Through internship experiences and anticipating their future careers, students seek **belonging, trust** and being treated as **full contributors**. Feedback, directional guidance, and mentorship matters.

### Examples

**Kimberly Berduo Velasquez (Delaware State University)** was entrusted with building a **state tourism report** during her marketing and communications internship at the Delaware Division of Small Business.

**Nicolette Conserve (Morgan State University)** shared that her experience at **Annual Convention** and continued engagements with Visit Baltimore and Visit Anne Arundel encourage her to explore a career path in the destination sector.

### Key Challenges

Destination organizations remain largely invisible. Students do not understand the sector until someone explains it.

Students noted that exposure and pipelines into destination organizations can depend on where you live and the travel costs that make internships and experiences accessible.

Students worry about leaders who are not patient with new graduates and environments that lack a team mentality.





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Destination Promotion: A Vehicle for Economic Development Report

NEXT

Futures Study

Launch of Advocacy &amp; Research Department

ADVOCACY

SUMMIT

The New Tourism Lexicon

Weaponization of Travel Study

Community Shared Value

Launch of DI Social Inclusion (formerly EDI Department)

Hire of Chief Inclusion Officer (formerly Chief Diversity Officer)

Community Benefit Funding Model

National Canadian Advocacy Strategy

Community Shared Value Roadmap Workbook

Historically Black Colleges &amp; Universities (HBCU) Scholarship Initiative

Canadian Visitor Based Assessment Report

Carbon Footprint Measurement for Destinations International

Annual Convention

CDME Scholarship Program

North American Resident Sentiment Research Studies

Small Destination &amp; Global Destination Event Scholarship Program

SOCIAL IMPACT

ASSESSMENT

Destination Promotion: A Catalyst for Community Vitality Report

Destination Effect Awareness Campaign — coming soon

2024

# From Insights to Action

Across all audiences five themes emerged with remarkable consistency. These themes now shape our work moving forward:

## 1. Amplifying and Sharing Replicable Best Practices

Professionals repeatedly asked for concrete, real-world models they can adapt, especially in culture-building, belonging, youth engagement and community-based workforce development.

### ► In Year 2, DI will:

Begin developing a centralized, accessible library of destination-driven practices.

Convene cross-audience learning sessions at DI events to share what's working and build collective momentum.

### ► Moving Forward, DI will:

Develop actionable playbooks tied to workforce attraction, engagement and retention in areas such as belonging and community partnerships.

## 2. Workforce Storytelling & Career Visibility

Every audience identified that people do not understand what destination organizations do nor the opportunities that exist within tourism.

### ► In Year 2, DI will:

Create storytelling assets and messaging tools for students, parents and educators that reframe tourism as a meaningful, stable career.

Work with Pathways to Success Scholarship recipients to shape student-centric narratives.

### ► Moving Forward, DI will:

Build career pathway visuals, "day in the life" profiles and role maps.

### 3. Strengthening Early Talent Pipelines (K-12 + Higher Ed)

Pipeline fragmentation was one of the strongest themes across audiences. CEOs want earlier engagement, faculty want applied projects and paid internships and students want hands-on experience earlier in their academic journey.

► **In Year 2, DI will:**

Work with destinations to source existing teaching materials for classrooms.

► **Moving Forward, DI will:**

Co-create teaching materials and modules for classrooms.

Support destinations in developing internships and experiential learning that reduce access barriers.

Provide partnership frameworks for schools, colleges and community organizations to collaborate consistently.

### 4. Manager & Leadership Skill-Building

Across all audiences, manager readiness surfaced as one of the greatest pressure points. Coordinators and 30 Under 30 alumni experience inconsistent communication and support. People and culture leaders need managers equipped in feedback, coaching and impact. CEOs see leadership development as essential to succession planning and confidence.

► **In Year 2, DI will:**

Expand leadership-based trainings offered as part of DI's Talent Accelerator Programs: 30 Under 30, Rising Industry Professionals and Pathways to Success scholars.

Work to define a core set of people-leadership competencies for destination professionals by level.

► **Moving Forward, DI will:**

Create foundational toolkits: conversation guides, feedback templates, development plans and conflict navigation resources.

### 5. Workforce Measurement & Advocacy

Many audiences asked for ways to measure and advocate for workforce progress: retention, representation, community engagement, pipeline participation, student outcomes and cultural health.

► **In Year 2, DI will:**

Develop shared language and talking points destinations can use with civic leaders and community partners to frame workforce as core to economic development, community well-being and destination competitiveness.

► **Moving Forward, DI will:**

Introduce a simple, destination-ready workforce measurement framework.

Offer templates for KPI tracking, internship evaluation, and workforce impact reporting.

# Closing and Thank You

Insights gathered throughout Year 1 reveal that workforce development is essential to a destination's success, community alignment and resilience.

Our industry is rich with purpose and opportunity. Yet the pathways into that opportunity remain largely invisible. Today's workforce expects transparency, belonging, modern leadership and meaningful growth. At the same time, external pressures such as housing, wage competition and perceptions of hospitality require us to communicate more clearly and collaborate more intentionally with educators, civic leaders and community partners.

**Thank you to the following destination organizations, partners and universities who shaped these insights:**

|                                                        |                                          |                                             |                            |
|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Charlottesville Albemarle Convention & Visitors Bureau | FiredUp                                  | Tennessee Department of Tourist Development | Visit Eau Claire           |
| Chattanooga Tourism Co.                                | Florida Atlantic University              | Tourism Economics                           | Visit Finger Lakes         |
| Choose Chicago                                         | Medellin                                 | Tourism Windsor Essex, Pelee Island         | Visit Frederick            |
| City of Ketchikan                                      | Meet Boston                              | Travel Manitoba                             | Visit Greater Palm Springs |
| Delaware State University                              | Miles Partnership                        | University of Central Florida               | Visit Huntington Beach     |
| Destination Cleveland                                  | Morgan State University                  | University of Illinois                      | Visit KC                   |
| Destination Madison                                    | North Carolina Central University (NCCU) | University of South Carolina                | Visit Lake Charles         |
| Discover Long Island                                   | Paradise - a partner for good            | University of the District of Columbia      | Visit Pensacola            |
| Discover the Palm Beaches                              | Pick Ellijay                             | Visit Anaheim                               | Visit Richmond             |
| Elkhart County CVB                                     | RTO4 (Regional Tourism Organization 4)   | Visit Austin                                | Visit Sacramento           |
| EnvisionIT                                             | SearchWide Global                        | Visit Baltimore                             | Visit GreenvilleSC         |
| Explore Edmonton                                       | Tempest                                  | Visit Colorado Springs                      | VisitLEX                   |
| Explore Elgin Area                                     |                                          |                                             | Welcome to Memphis         |
|                                                        |                                          |                                             | Western Montana            |



## Appendix: Challenges and Needs by Audience

### CEOs and Executive Directors

#### What's Challenging

Industry often perceived as low wage with no real career path.

Staff leave for higher-paying jobs or more advancement opportunities, making it hard to sustain local talent.

Housing affordability and transportation make it difficult for hospitality workers to access jobs, especially late-night/early-morning shifts.

Lack of data on career pathways, including where tourism students go after graduation and how they move through roles.

Public trust is fragile; mistakes or missteps can damage credibility given the “thin margin” of understanding about what destinations do.

Hospitality and tourism is missing from high school and guidance counselor conversations.

#### What's Needed

Reframed messaging and storytelling about to show long-term paths, diverse roles and real advancement opportunities.

Competitive, engaging development experiences and leadership pathways that make staying in the destination and industry feel worthwhile.

A seat at civic tables so tourism can advocate for workforce needs and highlight how infrastructure decisions impact talent.

Data capture and clearer visibility.

Stronger, ongoing training so teams are prepared and confident.

Earlier and more intentional engagement with schools, including presentations, counselor relationships, and resources that put tourism careers on the radar.

## People and Culture Leaders

### What's Challenging

Staff from different backgrounds do not always feel equally supported or integrated.

Onboarding varies widely by department or manager, leading to inconsistent employee experiences.

Managers often lack training in people leadership, especially in communication, conflict management and emotional intelligence.

### What's Needed

Tools and frameworks for strengthening belonging, including culture-building practices, cross-team collaboration models and strategies for managers.

Standardized onboarding templates and clear guidance on how to weave culture, mission and values into early employee touchpoints.

Accessible manager training that focuses on soft skills.

Models for mentorship and reverse mentorship, plus examples of how other destinations structure these relationships.

Mental health and well-being resources, toolkits, and examples of policies other destinations are implementing.

Lack of structured mentorship leaves emerging talent without guidance.

Leaders feel pressure to support staff mental health and well-being but lack structured tools or training.

## Community Engagement Professionals

### What's Challenging

Housing affordability pushes workers far from job sites.

Language and literacy barriers limit advancement for immigrant and non-English speakers.

School curricula are misaligned with industry expectations; students don't know they're qualified.

Unpaid internships, lack of stipends, and long travel distances exclude underrepresented students.

Inconsistent qualification standards across employers confuse jobseekers and students.

Difficulty tracking student outcomes due to privacy laws, decentralized systems and lack of shared KPIs.

Students and families lack visibility into tourism career diversity, leadership potential, and education-to-employment pathways.

### What's Needed

Collaboration with local government to incorporate tourism workforce needs into housing and economic development discussions.

Access to language equity programs and translation resources.

Stronger coordination with teachers and guidance counselors. Updated tourism-aligned curriculum materials. Expansion into youth organizations.

Paid internships and partnerships with funders to cover costs.

A shared competency framework and clearer communication of entry-level requirements.

Standardized KPI frameworks, youth engagement dashboards, and templates for data collection that comply with privacy guidelines.

Storytelling assets (videos, testimonials, example pathways) show real careers, leadership journeys, and local success stories.

## Early Career Professionals

### What's Challenging

Limited upward mobility due to flat organizational structures and long-tenured leadership blocking advancement.

Lack of recognition or investment in coordinator-level professional development; budget prioritizes senior leadership.

Unclear communication from leadership about performance, expectations, or advancement.

Pay and financial sustainability concerns—hospitality often pays less than other fields.

### What's Needed

Transparent career pathways, growth maps and early conversations about future roles even when no immediate openings exist.

Lateral development opportunities: cross-department projects, temporary stretch assignments. Access to conferences, DEI events, training stipends tailored to early-career professionals.

More proactive, transparent communication; scheduled career conversations; and clear feedback loops.

Competitive compensation practices, benefits that support early-career staff (flexibility, stipends, PTO), or clearer pathways to wage growth.

## Evolving Leaders

### What's Challenging

Organizational structures are often too flat, limiting upward mobility; many feel they must leave their destination to advance.

Burnout, “always on” expectations, especially for events, social media or community-facing roles.

Desire for more purpose-driven work and chances to innovate often feel restricted by hierarchy.

Lack of representation in leadership; not enough leaders who reflect the identity and lived experiences of emerging professionals.

Difficulty advocating for themselves, fear of being labeled “difficult.”

### What's Needed

Clearer career pathways, cross-department rotations, and leadership development that allows advancement without leaving the organization.

More sustainable resourcing, balanced workloads, time-off protections, and normalizing rest without guilt.

Opportunities to lead passion projects, pilot new ideas and participate in strategy-setting conversations.

Intentional leadership development, mentorship programs and representative role models.

Tools for self-advocacy, communication training, and psychologically safe spaces for honest upward feedback.



## University Faculty and Professors

### What's Challenging

Faculty lack insight into what destinations look for in new hires (competencies, expectations, soft skills).

Tourism careers are poorly understood by parents and students; many don't see destination roles or long-term career potential.

Disconnect between what industry needs and what faculty can embed in curriculum.

Students often lack real-world experience until late in their program, which limits early-year confidence.

Students struggle to understand what a destination actually does; exposure often varies dramatically by program.

### What's Needed

Clearer entry-level competency lists and "career readiness" expectations.

Clear career visibility tools, including role maps, example career pathways, alumni stories and parent-facing messaging around economic mobility.

More structured collaboration on projects, assignments and curriculum-aligned applied learning.

Earlier access to experiential learning, site visits and mentorship.

Baseline "Destination 101" materials for faculty to use — videos, sample org charts, case studies.

## University Students

### What's Challenging

Destination organizations are largely invisible. Most students had little to no understanding of destination organizations or their career pathways until a professor or DI exposure explained it.

Access gaps (cost, geography, and equity barriers). Students in smaller markets feel they have fewer opportunities; travel costs limit access to conferences; some internships feel financially inaccessible.

Limited real-world exposure. Students learn far more from speakers, conferences, and internships than from textbooks, and many don't get enough experiential contact.

### What's Needed

Clear, early career visibility, simple explanations of what destination organizations do, role and career pathway examples and real stories that show the impact and variety of destination work.

Paid or stipend-supported experiences, financial assistance, micro-internships, and low/no-cost opportunities that make participation feasible.

Hands-on learning: Shadowing, project-based courses, guest speakers, mentorship, and early applied experiences (freshman/sophomore year).



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